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Philip Geyelin

The Year of the Spy—Again

A headline in the New York Times hollers: "U.S. OFFICIALS FIND IMMENSE DAMAGE IN ESPIONAGE CASES." In his regular Saturday radio address, President Reagan sounds a stern warning: "The free world is today confronted with some of the most sophisticated, best-orchestrated efforts of theft and espionage in modern history." A headline in The Post heralds: "THE YEAR OF THE SPY."

The year was 1985.

So what else is new? Not much, alas. A mere 14 months after Ronald Reagan was telling us that the unmasking of the Walkers, the Pollards, Edward Howard and all the rest "should alert us to the danger we face" and saying "how necessary it is to maintain top-quality counterintelligence efforts," we confront yet another security breakdown in the same old, nearly hysterical way.

No more business as usual with the Soviets, we are advised; George Shultz cannot go to Moscow, we were told; the Russians have broken the rules; the damage is irreparable; the heads of the responsible American officials must roll.

Rep. Daniel Mica (D-Fla.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on international operations, had barely arrived in Moscow on an inspection tour to assess the damage at the U.S. Embassy before pronouncing judgment: "A security, diplomatic and intelligence disaster of the first magnitude." He and the senior Republican on the subcommittee, Rep. Olympia Snowe of Maine, instantly demanded an "accountability review board" to affix blame.

That's fair enough. The president has already set in motion a three-pronged investigation into what went wrong. The guilty should be punished, and obviously every effort should be made to tighten up security. But a little perspective is in order, all the same, if we are not going to delude ourselves into believing that there was something essentially new about the current espionage flap—something that can be identified and dealt with in a neat and airtight way.

That is precisely what the congressional scape-goating and the second-guessing of the administration would have us believe. The same may be said for the administration's efforts to slip the congressional punches by lambasting the Soviets for going "beyond the bounds of reason" (Reagan) or "the limits of unacceptable activities" (Shultz).

But history is not helpful if you are trying to put your finger on what's "reasonable" or "acceptable" in what is by definition a dirty, dangerous game. The technology gets ever more exotic. But the basics remain remarkably the same.

The interaction of the world's second-oldest profession with the first did not even originate with Mata Hari. Not even the seduction of Marine guards to allow KGB agents into secret recesses of the Moscow embassy is without precedent: that same number was done on Marine guards in our Warsaw embassy 38 years ago.

Secretary Shultz complains that "they broke into our embassy—they invaded our sovereign territory, and we are damned upset about it." Well, it is upsetting, and the consequences could be severe. But planting bugs in embassies surely requires some sort of invasion, and that practice—by both sides—is nothing new (though bugging in the course of construction is a new twist).

In 1960, our United Nations representative, Henry Cabot Lodge, went before the U.N. Security Council to show the whole world how the KGB had wired the Great Seal of the United States that hangs in the office of our ambassador in Moscow. In April 1984, Richard Nixon reminisced on "60 Minutes": "Both in this country and in the Soviet Union, we attempt to bug each other's embassies. As a matter of fact, there is also evidence to the effect that Brezhnev's car was bugged."

None of this is to excuse treasonable acts, whether we are talking about U.S. Marines or the spies of 1985. Nor does it relieve security officers, ambassadors or State Department officials of responsibility for breaches of security. There are things that plainly need fixing: U.S. control over the assembly of the new embassy building was hopelessly inadequate. A case can be made for fewer Soviet employees, better-trained, professional security guards and a higher level of alert all around.

But the record of KGB bugging, and of entrapment of Americans in Moscow—journalists, as well as officials, both civilian and military—since World War II suggests that "outraged" protests and threats of no more business as usual are empty bombast. The relentlessly inventive practice of espionage and counterespionage is business as usual between us and the Soviets.